

PHOTO: JACK MCCONNELL



PRESERVING WORKING LANDS FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

Award-Winning Goat Dairy Farm Protected

“No matter how you think about it, farms and food are inextricably intertwined. Without one, you do not have the other. In this newsletter you will read about farms, food, and farmers who make it happen. Of course, we mustn’t forget the land, the common thread to it all. Thank you again for your support in preserving farmland for Connecticut’s farmers and all of us.”

— Elisabeth Moore,
Connecticut Farmland
Trust Executive Director

Each goat has a name, and each goat has a personality on Beltane Farm. But, cute and cuddly don’t pay the bills. Paul Trubey and Mark Pearsall, owners of Beltane, must keep finding new answers to the same question all farmers ask: how do I stay in business today and into the future?

To create a sustainable business, they followed the advice given to many entrepreneurs – diversify from the core.

The farm’s core business is milk. With a herd of 100 Oberhasli, La Mancha, and Saanen goats, Mark and Paul create award-winning goat milk cheese. (Their fresh chevre won a first place national award at an American Cheese Society competition.) The cheese as well as Greek-style yogurt and raw goat’s milk are sold at farmers’ markets, stores, and cooperatives throughout Southern New England.

The farm’s diversification component is a burgeoning agriculture-tourism business where visitors can experience life on the farm. During the fall visitors can meet the goats, sample cheese, tour the farm, and picnic on the grounds, and in the summer months there are weed walks where participants learn about wild herbs and other plants on the farm and taste cheese. For those interested in getting their hands and boots dirty, guests can attend a Farming Weekend where they stay overnight at Beltane and milk goats and assist with cheese making and work in organic vegetable fields at a neighboring farm.

Business smarts aren’t enough. Mark and Paul must pour hard work and passion

into the farm every day to keep the barn doors open. And as with any successful enterprise, they need help now and then.

Enter Connecticut Farmland Trust

Paul and Mark began talking with Connecticut Farmland Trust (CFT) about protecting their growing farm 10 years ago. When the land across the street went on the market, the two farmers contacted the Town of Lebanon, CT Department of Agriculture, and Connecticut Farmland Trust about selling the development rights on their farm to limit certain uses on the property like housing subdivisions. This type of agreement keeps land in private hands and preserves traditional land uses such as family farms. The goat farmers used the money to help buy the 14-acre parcel across the road, which gave them the space to expand their herd.

Beltane Farm is now preserved as farmland for generations to come, and Mark and Paul can worry less about the future and more about being in the barn with their beloved goats.



PHOTO: JACK MCCONNELL

Paul Trubey and goat kid, Beltane Farm, Lebanon

An Interview with Robin Chesmer, The Farmer's Cow

Q. How and why did you first start as a dairy farmer?

A. Even though I didn't grow up on a farm, I visited one as a child and loved it. On my first farm I raised hay and a menagerie of animals, including dairy replacements. Then, I had the chance to buy a dairy farm from a retiring farmer. Land values were high so I leased the farm while a conservation easement was placed on the land making it affordable. I then purchased the farm at its agricultural value.

Q. Why did you get involved with Connecticut Farmland Trust?

A. Knowing first hand, how preserved farmland can provide affordable land to new farmers, I joined the Working Lands Alliance. The need was soon recognized to create a land trust focused solely on investing in farmland preservation. From that recognition Connecticut Farmland Trust was started in 2001. I volunteered to serve on its board and have been a member ever since.

Q. How did The Farmer's Cow begin?

A. We evolved from Very Alive, a group of dairy farmers and agri-businesses working together to demonstrate the many values provided by local farms and that agriculture was "very alive" in Connecticut. Our farmers worked well together and in 2005 we decided to launch our own brand of milk: The Farmer's Cow.

Q. What are the challenges of farming in Connecticut?

A. Farmers, old and new, need access to good land that is affordable. Development pressure on farmland has been in a lull but it will return forcefully when the economy improves. It is important to build a strong infrastructure that supports new farmers and to aggressively ramp up efforts to preserve the farmland we have.



Connecticut Farmland Trust Board member Robin Chesmer is Managing Member of The Farmer's Cow and owns Graywall Farms. Left to Right; David Hevner, Robin's son-in-law (kneeling), Robin Chesmer (center), and son Lincoln Chesmer (right)

Q. What's the future of Graywall Farms? Is the next generation involved?

A. Graywall Farms is a family farm. My son, Lincoln, is the farm manager, and my son-in-law, David Hevner, manages the young stock. I have five grandchildren and my oldest granddaughter has completed studies at Cobleskill Agricultural College. All the grandchildren are enthusiastic about the farm – including the four-year-old!

Q. Why did you preserve your farms?

A. Graywall Farms is truly a product of farmland preservation. It allowed us to buy our original dairy farm and expand our land base. Proceeds from the sale of development rights have been re-invested in additional farmland. We now own 750 acres of protected farmland.

"Proceeds from the sale of development rights have been re-invested in additional farmland. We now own 750 acres of protected farmland."

— Robin Chesmer



Support Farms Protected by Connecticut Farmland Trust

A number of farms we've conserved have stores and stands that are open to the public. We hope you'll visit them and show your support for CT agriculture.

Walnut Ledge Farm, South Glastonbury – maple syrup and pick-your-own blueberries

Cold Spring Brook Farm, Berlin – seasonal farm store with vegetables and bedding plants

Humphrey Evergreen Farms, Hamden – cut-your-own Christmas trees

Stonewall Dairy Farm, West Cornwall – farm store with raw milk, eggs, honey, beef and local produce

Cato Corner Farm, Colchester – farm store with farmstead raw milk cheese

Wike Brothers Farm, Sharon – farm store with pasture raised beef, pork, and eggs

Beltane Farm, Lebanon – seasonal cheese tastings and farm tours

Check farm websites for store hours and directions.

Farmer's Story

April Moon is Connecticut Farmland Trust's Communications Associate and with her family runs Brush Hill Dairy



April Moon and her son Austen

I vaguely remember the winter of 1993/1994. Fuzzy memories of watching my dad deliver our first calves and milk our first cows exist somewhere in the back of my mind. At a time when so many other folks were leaving the dairy business, my parents were just diving in. I'm sure some people thought they were crazy, and at times, they may have thought they were crazy themselves.

When my parents' business first began, it was standard for dairy farmers to ship their milk off farm to be pasteurized, homogenized, and then sold in the grocery store; and for many years, that's just how our farm operated. There was a division – the people who bought our milk did not know us, our farm, our animals, or our story.

As the dairy industry continued to struggle, my parents were faced with decisions on how to keep the farm running. In 2003 they sold the development rights to our 160-acre farm, ensuring it would remain farmland forever. But the question arose — how do we continue to farm this land and make a living?

They weighed the options: someone could work off farm, we could sell off some cows, or we could increase our herd size. None of these choices seemed to fit, so in 2004 they began selling retail raw milk from our small 40-cow herd.

The raw milk was our first big step to diversify our farm. We purchased laying hens so we could sell eggs, began raising cows for beef, and eventually added a large vegetable garden. Once our products outgrew our tiny farmstand, we began selling at local farmers' markets and created a CSA to market some of our vegetables.

When we got to know these people, we had the opportunity to learn what they wanted. Consumers were becoming increasingly conscious of the food

they were feeding their families. So, we made some changes ourselves. We began pasturing our cows, installed a barn that composted cow manure, and grew vegetables using organic practices.

Today, we continue to learn from the folks we interact with on a daily basis, and we continue to make changes that will please our customers and keep our farm business viable.

Many other farms throughout the state have also opted to diversify, learn about their customers, and cater to them. Other dairies began selling raw milk and raw milk cheese, and some pasteurize on farm and market their milk, yogurt, and ice cream directly to consumers. Still others have started growing fruits and vegetables for farmers' markets, or turning their produce into jams and jellies.

Today, Connecticut farmers and consumers have created a strong relationship, linking farmers to food and consumers.

While there is still much uncertainty surrounding the future of Connecticut's farms, I believe that if we continue to work together to protect our farmland and nurture our young farmers there will always be consumers who want to buy our food.

“As our market grew, we had the opportunity to meet the people who were eating the food we produced.”



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Join Us and Celebrate

Harvest Dinner on the Farm at The Hickories

Ridgefield, CT

September 13, 2015

3:00 – 7:00

Contact 860.247.0202

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